

1



WHEN ERIN DELANEY and her classmates were finishing fifth grade, balancing nervously on the threshold of middle school, Jessica Southard had thrown her first sleepover, inviting a handful of girlfriends for a night whose entertainment consisted of grilling hamburgers and hot dogs, playing board games like Scattergories and Pictionary, and watching a scary movie till their two o'clock curfew. That deadline had been strictly enforced by Jess's mom, Erin's Aunt Jennifer, the sister of Erin's mom, Cathy. And afterward, seeing what fun the event had been, Jen Southard gave in to Jess's wish to make the sleepover an annual event—having no idea what an elaborate production it would become. Over the years, the Annual Southard Sleepover, despite its unfortunate acronym, evolved into an April ritual that drew as many as two dozen teenagers, employed Russ Southard as the proud grill master, added dozens of games that came and went with waxing and waning fads, and, as the girls matured, dropped its curfew altogether. The previous year, every girl who had come pulled an all-nighter.

This year's sleepover might well be the last. All the girls in attendance recognized that in twelve months they would be scattered to the winds, most of them having already accepted admission to colleges and universities hundreds or even thousands of miles away. Whether the sleepover would survive in some new form or terminate entirely was impossible

to predict. The girls recognized the uncertainty of their future together, which tinged the atmosphere in the Southard residence with a somber cast as the sun set and the last few guests straggled through the front door on the first Friday in April.

Uncle Russ was already presiding over the giant Weber grill on the back patio when Erin arrived. Smoke wafted upward into the dusk, and the aroma of beef and bratwurst drifted in through the sliding screen doors. The weather was comfortable—sweatshirt weather, not so cold that the patio doors must be kept shut. Erin's cousin Jeremy, fourteen years old, was standing next to Russ, bouncing a basketball on the concrete while his hopeful eyes flitted among the bevy of older girls mingling inside. As he had grown up, he had taken a greater interest in the spring sleepovers.

Erin said hi to Aunt Jen and passed along a message from her mom. Jen was fiddling with a video camera and explained that she was hoping to shoot lots of footage and burn copies of a DVD the girls could take with them to college. She was learning to edit video as part of her web design class at Ivy Tech, where she was working on an associate degree with hopes of someday starting a business. Erin and Jen talked for a few minutes about Grandpa Dee, for everyone now accepted—with guilty gratitude—that among all his local descendants, Erin had become his favorite thanks to the time she was investing in his life. Sadly, most of his relatives now regarded him as a necessary burden in their lives.

Next, Erin sought out Sally Richards, her best friend among the seniors who would stay the night. Secretly, she was pleased to see Sally wearing neon-yellow gym shorts that did not try to hide her legs, which were still skinny but clearly adding mass after her struggles with anorexia. All the girls knew about it but nobody talked about it. Sally had been dating Cody Summers since October, and because of their relationship Erin too had gotten to know Cody as a friend and not merely a classmate. Baseball season started in a week, and Sally wanted to talk about that, for she was a team manager who this year would keep the scorebook, allowing her the privilege of sitting in the dugout for every game. When Erin's interest in that topic flagged, Sally wandered off. The back of her yellow shorts were emblazoned with a logo Erin had seen somewhere before, a logo with shapes that looked like the letters *Y* and *L*.

When Uncle Russ and Jeremy brought in a metal pan full of steaming burgers and brats, many of the girls formed an assembly line to pick up paper plates, plastic dinnerware, and napkins, and to begin putting together their dinner. Each girl had contributed a snack, side dish, or dessert item. Erin had brought a potato salad she had made herself, which now sat on a separate table with other sides—baked beans, green beans, several pasta salads and fruit salads. The desserts not requiring refrigeration occupied another table, larger and covered with a thin protective sheet of teal-colored plastic. Amid the usual variations on brownies and cookies, Erin saw that Sally (or probably Cody, she was sure) had donated three cans of weird new flavors of Pringles, including one called “Jalapeno Taco.” Jen had ordered a single-layer slab cake whose frosting showed a color photograph of the Southard home, produced by some high-tech process Erin did not understand. Above the tables, Jen had printed, laminated, and hung a banner announcing LAST (?) ANNUAL SOUTHARD SLEEPOVER; Erin realized that her aunt was using this night as a warm-up for Jess’s graduation party two months in the future. That explained the color-coordinated napkins, dinnerware, and plastic cups, too.

Within the next hour all of the expected “party-party”—that’s the term they had adopted for themselves a couple of years earlier—had arrived, eaten, and settled into the inevitable cliques that would shift and merge into numerous combinations through the night. Erin had grown to appreciate the sleepover for its unmatched potential for what Cody called “intelligence gathering and information processing.” Gossip ran rampant. That quality of the party had also evolved over time as regular party-partiers accepted and enforced an unwritten rule that what was shared at the sleepover stayed at the sleepover. Erin tended to listen rather than gab; however, the events of her senior year had stocked her with ample ammunition should she choose to open her mouth for something other than food. She was actually excited about the evening.

And so, hour by hour, the sleepover unfolded with a life of its own. Having popped several large bowls of popcorn, six or seven girls retreated to the basement to watch and poke fun at a vampire movie. Erin drifted into and out of their company long enough to hear them

debating the pros and cons of other movies currently in the theaters while keeping close enough watch on their vampire flick to toss out sarcastic comments when warranted. Laurie Fritz amused Erin. Every comment from Laurie's lips followed the same pattern: "I heard it's really *dumb*" was her contribution to the assessment of every movie.

In the living room Erin plopped onto a couch next to Lauren Lancaster and Terri Harlow and joined their laments about Mr. Hostetter's annoying penchant for puns. Terri especially was a noted complainer, but Erin agreed that Mr. Hostetter's jokes were tiresome.

"I think he knows everybody thinks they're stupid, but he just wants kids to like him," suggested Lauren.

"How many times has he called Amanda Leer 'Chanda'?" Erin asked with affected irritation. "He always acts like it's the first time he's said it."

"Chanda Leer, get it, get it?" mimicked Terri. "He sounds like such a moron. Yes, we get it, Bob. Go make babies with Michelle."

Earlier in the school year, Mr. Hostetter's rumored dalliance with another math teacher, Michelle Newman, had spawned rich speculation. Hostetter's skin was pale and Newman was of Indian descent, so students often joked about the skin color of their future family. Cody had even constructed a chart showing genetic possibilities.

When Terri and Lauren's target shifted to other senior girls—not at the sleepover—Erin politely excused herself.

She sidled in among a circle of giggling girls watching Jeremy Southard shoot baskets outside, under the arc of two floodlights. Soon she gathered that the girls were aware that Jeremy was aware of their interest. They were flirting, essentially, with the sliding glass doors between them.

"Give him two, three more years and he'll be a hunk," predicted Julie Straley, authoritatively.

"His feet are puny," offered Mora Partridge, and after a suitable pause, the tittering began.

"I heard he wants to be a Marine," Julie added. "We need to ask Jess."

Their talk turned to the future plans of dozens of other seniors. Rosie Osborn was expected to have her baby and go to Ivy Tech, at least for now. Juan Melendez—presumed to be the father—would be settling for Riverside after failing to get into the University of Illinois.

The girls agreed that it was best for him to be close to Rosie. Jill Henry had not yet chosen between Stanford and Cal-Berkeley but was leaning toward Stanford because she had an aunt who lived in the San Francisco area. Knowing that eventually the spotlight would fall on her, Erin grew uncomfortable. She *did* want to talk about college, or rather her indecision, but not with these girls. With whom? Jess, perhaps, since she might understand Erin's silent conflict with her dad. Sally Richards, maybe, since she had talked some to Cody about her dilemma. But most of all, Erin knew, she wanted to talk to Mrs. Hillis. Well, that would not happen at the sleepover.

Erin studiously avoided Uncle Russ, fearing that he had been in touch with her father and would want to talk about her college plans. She wished just one person would side with her, would not surrender to the notion that the bigger and more famous school was always better.

Around 11:30 the movie critics took a break and a large group began playing Scattergories. Erin played a few rounds, less for the friendly competition than for the amusement at the arguments that arose over whether or not to accept certain answers. Diminutive Kelly Bennett, always vying for attention, learned she could get it by stringing multiple adjectives onto the front of her answers. She tried to use "wet, wild, wonderful wafers" for THINGS FOUND AT A BEACH, which earned her a unanimous thumbs-down. The game's instructions were nowhere to be found, though, so nobody could prove that her adjectives were illegal. Pleased with the controversy she was generating, Kelly proceeded to answer "laughing little lion lozenges" for THINGS IN A SOUVENIR SHOP and "cold, clammy, ceramic, catcher's cup" for SPORTS EQUIPMENT. At that point, several girls threw down their answer pads and the game split up in a raucous cacophony of laughter and irritation.

Sue Fisher and Sheena Straley, both Dairy Queen employees for Mr. Myers, debated the merits and shortcomings of different DQ Blizzards. Sheena proposed they make a DQ run, but the majority of the party-party voted to stay put, so the mission never materialized.

"We could always have J.J. bring us Blizzards when they close," Sheena suggested, unwilling to give up. J.J. Weaver was working that

night till close. But the idea of a boy crashing their party, even to deliver ice cream, was off-limits according to the sleepover tradition.

A lot of kids were trying to unravel a mystery that was also perplexing Erin—the appearance on the hallway walls and classroom doors at school of signs and posters bearing the message *1-2-3-4: ARE YOU READY?* Teachers were tight-lipped, everyone agreed. But Sue Fisher claimed that Mrs. Newman’s student teacher in math class had let slip that the signs would be just the first of many and that the faculty were “kind of cynical about it.”

Close to midnight, Cara Eberle began showing off photographs of her prom dress on her iPhone. Everyone who already had a prom date (or hoped for one) joined in around the snack table, producing similar photos and jabbering about plans for dinners and limousines, and for the following day, when the school tradition was for seniors to drive in a cavalcade to Cincinnati for a day at King’s Island. Erin had no plans to go to Prom—unless Nate Dyer surprised her with an invitation—but she was mildly envious of the fancy dresses her friends were buying, borrowing, or renting.

“If I had a famous parent, I would want them to be a country singer,” Molly Traxton remarked to Julie Straley, and that stray comment started an impromptu half hour in which most of the girls weighed in on Molly’s hypothetical issue and invented their own. Jess asked, “Of all the senior guys, which one has the cutest nose?” After they had taken turns responding, a consensus was reached: Jim McHeaton was the winner. Next, Lauren Lancaster asked, “If you were going to spend a year on a desert island, what TV series would you take on DVD?” A number of candidates were proposed, but the game fizzled when Sally Richards suggested *Man vs. Wild* and Jess related that on a recent episode she had watched Bear Grylls eat a pair of goat testicles, calling them a “delicacy,” and Jill Henry asked, “I wonder where he got those?” By this point, fatigue was settling into the party, lowering inhibitions, and Jill’s comment sparked uproarious laughter that carried on for five minutes.

Erin remembered the same pattern of degeneration at previous sleepovers. Once weariness set in, the focus and moral quality of the conversations spiraled downward until the girls who remained awake were reduced to judging classmates and teachers and generally unveiling

the darkness seething within them. Only the vigilance of Aunt Jen and Uncle Russ kept the parties free of alcohol and drugs.

At least one of her fears was apparently not going to materialize: the raid from the boys. Despite the rumors and threats, it was late enough now that no boys were going to crash the party. Uncle Russ and Aunt Jen were still awake, even though they were keeping their distance from their guests.

During the first hours of the sleepover, the possibility of boys not only showing up but actually joining the girls had seemed likely and seemed to energize most of the girls. Not Erin. When she protested with trepidation and attempted diplomacy that adding boys to their mixture would be dangerous, she was teased for being a prude. Jess herself stated for all to hear that Erin needed to join the new century. After that, Erin kept her misgivings to herself. Throughout the evening, however, she kept thinking about the source of her scruples. Why would a boy-girl sleepover be so wrong? There might be unwanted consequences, surely, but was something right or wrong depending only on its results? Likewise, she could not make such a judgment based only on *her* convenience or preference, could she? She let her conscience experiment with different moral hypotheses, just as she had been doing with the school cheating. What troubled her most was that she knew that the cheating, and boys at the party, were wrong, yet she could form no coherent argument to explain why. Trying to do so left her thrashing like a drowning swimmer. She just *knew* some things were wrong. And she knew that such a moral struggle was also part of her growing up. That's what Mrs. Hillis continually reminded her—Mrs. Hillis, who because of her relationship with Mr. McCauley also had said, "I'm the last person to ask about right and wrong right now." Regardless, when no boys appeared, Erin was pleased. She really needed a few days away from Matt, whose behavior had become so erratic and frightening ever since he had come back early from his Spring Break trip to Florida without giving her any clear reason and had gotten angry when she tried to pry the reason from his tight lips.

Back in the basement, a few girls were dozing on the couch or in chairs, so last year's perfect record of no sleep would not be equaled. A fire

was blazing in the hearth, and Jeremy, still hoping to get his foot inside the older-girls door, was jabbing at the flames with a poker. The girls were debating whether the Islamic promise for heroes was seventy-*two* or seventy-*six* virgins.

“Whichever, it doesn’t make any sense,” argued Laurie Fritz. “It’s all so dumb.”

“How long would they be virgins, is what I want to know,” Molly Traxton said, yawning prodigiously.

“Right!” agreed Laurie. “And once they aren’t virgins any more, then what happens? Is the hero stuck with them forever? Or does he get a whole new batch of seventy-two?”

“Seventy-six.”

“Whatever...”

“It’s seventy-two,” Julie Straley said, waving her smart phone. “I just googled it.”

“What if a girl is the hero? What does she get?”

“It’s all so dumb.”

Erin noticed Jess hovering at the perimeter of the conversation—an unaccustomed spot for her. When their eyes met, Jess gestured with a nod for Erin to follow. They went to Jess’s bedroom. Jess locked the door behind them.

“Can you believe all that?” Jess asked. “About the virgins?”

Erin could sense where this was headed, so she steeled herself.

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, I don’t know. It’s just that you and Matt, and ...” Jess was nervous almost to the point of stuttering. What did she want to say?

“I just wanted to tell you that ...” Her eyes seemed suddenly mesmerized by the hanging philodendron in the corner of the room. “Well, Matt and I ...”

For a split second Erin thought that Jess wanted to say that she and Matt were getting back together, and she rejoiced—but then the incongruity of the idea made her laugh, and something like jealousy began pounding in her chest. Jess, newly bold, finished: “Matt wanted me to tell you ... Well, I just want you to know that Matt never ... that me and Matt never slept together.”

It took a moment for the statement to register in Erin’s mind.

“So, all your little comments ever since school started? What were they all about?” Anger was supplanting her jealousy. Then she realized the truth and whispered, “You were trying to help Matt win that stupid bet, weren’t you?” She shoved her cousin sharply and Jess fell backward onto her bed.

“Erin, I didn’t even know about that until ...”

“You mean you didn’t know that *I* knew about it! That’s what you meant. But Matt told me before Spring Break. I can’t believe you would do that to me!”

“It wasn’t really doing it *to you*,” Jess said defensively, apologetically. “It was more *for Matt*.”

“Whatever,” Erin said, unlocking the door. “You and your drama—all of your drama and everyone else’s drama. It makes me sick. You know what? It’s weird. Everyone is so excited about going off to college, and that’s all anyone talks about, it seems like. And I don’t really want to go, because ...” She stopped. She didn’t want to talk to Jess about Riverside and Nate Dyer and her dad. She didn’t trust Jess at all right now. “Well, it’s just weird, because I think I’m more ready for college than everybody else with all their immature drama.”

Without waiting to hear Jess’s response, she walked out. Nothing her cousin had said surprised her. She had long suspected that Jess’s boasting about her exploits with boys was all hot air—and Matt’s confession about the bet confirmed it. Although Jess had not exactly said so, Erin concluded that her cousin and her boyfriend had not only never slept together, but they had never been with anyone else, either. Who cared, anyway? At least Matt had finally respected her enough to tell her the truth. If it weren’t already two o’clock in the morning, she might try to go find him.

Instead, she returned to the living room. Several girls had started watching another movie, a suspense flick that Cara Eberle said was called *I Know Where You Live*. It featured a teenage girl baby-sitting in a home where the power went out during a lightning storm with an escaped stalker/killer on the loose.

Erin plopped down on the sofa beside Sally Richards, who was actually munching on a snickerdoodle and sucking milkshake through a straw. Erin felt compelled to say something encouraging, so she whispered, “I meant to tell you earlier, Sally: You’re looking great!”

Sally smiled drowsily, evidently still self-conscious. She held out the cookie toward Erin, who shook her head and said, “No thanks. I’m trying to *lose* weight”—then realized the careless insensitivity of her comment. But Sally chuckled.

“Really,” Erin went on, “what you’ve done is just amazing.” She didn’t want to say that she and dozens of other girls had done a lot of their own research into eating disorders when Sally had become ill. The hallways at school were full of experts, now.

“Not really,” Sally said. “I mean, I don’t deserve the credit. I had a ton of help.”

Erin studied Sally’s face.

“A ton of prayers,” she added.

That seemed like a strange thing to say, but before Erin could ask or even indicate her confusion, Sally said, “I’ve got a lot of new friends.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.”

Erin looked at the other girls on the couch, their eyes all glued to the TV screen. The teenage baby-sitter in the horror movie was on the phone looking out an open window, the stalker hiding in the shadowed shrubbery just a few feet below her. Any moment now she would see him and scream—and so would all the girls on the couch.

“Not these guys,” Sally said. “I mean, they’re my friends, but I’m talking about my friends at Young Life.”

“Young Life?” Then Erin remembered where she had seen the logo on Sally’s shorts before. YL—that was the group she had been invited to by the wife of Mr. McCauley’s friend from ¿Que Pasa?

“They’ve stuck with me all the way,” Sally continued. “They helped me keep to my *purpose*. I feel like I have a purpose every day now, from when I wake up in the morning to when I go to bed at night.”

To Erin, Sally’s words sounded like something she was reading from note cards or a teleprompter, as if she were auditioning for a commercial. But Erin didn’t dare say something so rude to someone who had battled back from someplace as dark and dangerous as Sally had been a few months before. And even if the words sounded fake, they were full of hope. What Erin herself wouldn’t give to feel a sense of purpose with her life!

“That sounds great,” she finally said.

The TV baby-sitter reached to shut the window, the stalker rose from his hiding place, and the basement couch erupted in screams.

“Hey Erin,” said a boy’s voice behind her. She looked up and saw Jeremy’s face, upside down.

“Hey, Jeremy. What are you still doing up?”

“I don’t know.”

“Looking for action?”

He chuckled and admitted, “You guys *are* fun to be around.”

“I’ve watched you, watching us. Scouting.”

“I like all the nice smells,” he joked. “Yours best of all.” He sniffed. “Lilac, right?”

She nodded.

“I can say that to you because you’re my cousin and you won’t think I’m hitting on you. Want to shoot some baskets?”

“Sure. Why not?”

She pulled on her sweatshirt and followed Jeremy onto the patio, where he turned on the floodlights. The scent of grease hovered thickly in the air.

After a few minutes of shooting, Jeremy asked, “So, how’s Nate Dyer doing? Mom said that Aunt Cathy said you were with him the other night.”

Did she really want to spill her guts to this freshman? Okay, so he was her cousin. Still, he might be spying for Jess, or even for Matt.

“It was just a coincidence, a chance meeting,” she explained. Which was true. Her mom had called her at home, having forgotten two boxes of supplies for a catering job, and begged Erin to bring them to a building on the Riverside campus. When Erin made the delivery, she found that Nate was attending the event, a banquet for a club. She stuck around. They spent nearly an hour talking in the corner, not leaving until custodians began running their brooms along the floors and shutting out the lights. At first Erin had felt uneasy, but when Nate said he was thinking of switching his major to forestry, her spirits rallied. She ransacked her memory: Never had she shared with Nate her own interest in that field. She wanted to interpret their conversation as a sign

that she should not give up on him. The next day in her psychology class, though, she learned about wish fulfillment and wondered whether her new interest in forestry might be just a projection of a subconscious desire to be together again with Nate. Totally confused, she imagined herself reeling in the turbulent vortex of a whirlwind, like the one she had seen at the Junction, crying out for someone to reach into her chaos and save her—and she wanted that someone to be Nate.

But she did not dare tell any of this to Jeremy Southard.

“Lemme ask you something, Erin,” Jeremy began tentatively. “There’s this girl I like, and I was wondering if it’s a good thing to buy her a gift certificate to a hair place or a spa or someplace like that.”

“Wow, I’m impressed,” Erin countered teasingly.

“I remember how *hot* you looked during Christmas, and Jess said you had gone to that new place at the mall.”

“Well, thanks,” she said warily, “I guess.”

Aware that he was waiting for her to finish, she said, “You don’t know the whole story about that.” And he wasn’t about to find out now. After Christmas Break, when she returned to school, the remnants of her visit to Looking Good! at the mall had drawn raves from guys and questions from girls, yet she couldn’t tell anyone the whole truth. She had gone to Hot Shots on New Year’s Eve, just hours before her fateful visit to Mr. McCauley’s. Her outfit, if you could call it that, she had chosen herself—but she wanted her face done professionally. Later she told her girlfriends all about her experience at the mall but withheld her reason for going there.

“My other idea,” Jeremy went on, “was to buy her some perfume. What do you think?”

“Like I’m the expert?”

“More than *me*! I would ask Jess, but she would just make fun of me and try to find out who the girl is. I don’t want to tell her, not yet.”

“You’re so loveable, Jeremy!” She reached up and patted his cheek. She wondered whether everyone in the family had the same one-track mind. She could excuse Jeremy, though, for he was a guy.

“So? Would you like it if a guy gave you perfume? If Matt did?”

“Well, I guess so. But it would have to be a perfume I liked. Do you know what she likes?” By now Erin had gotten off the couch and was face-to-face with her cousin. At her question, his countenance fell.

“I never thought of it that way,” he said dolefully.

“You little cheat!” she joshed. “You were going to get her a smell that *you* liked.”

“Yeah, but ...” His voice trailed off in embarrassment and defeat.

“Find out what she likes first.”

“How?”

“Hmm. That isn’t easy for me to say without knowing who she is. You could ask her sister, if she has one, or her best friends.”

“Okay. I can try that.”

He was so transparent! Erin could see that all he really wanted was for this mysterious girl to smell like he wanted her to smell. Boys were so selfish!

“What’s the perfume you like so much, anyway?” she asked.

“Well,” he said sheepishly, “whatever it is that you have on right now.”

Erin laughed.

“It’s called Spring Lilac,” she answered. “And you can get it at Kohl’s at the Bridgebury Mall. But don’t get it until you find a girl who likes it, too. Promise me!”

The movie reached a particularly scary part that drew screams—some genuine, most faked—from the girls on the couch. The two sleepers shifted but did not awaken. Jeremy inched toward the stairs, heading to bed.

Erin mused. Something about her perfume was igniting unusual interest. At school both Mrs. Hillis and Mr. McCauley had asked about it, too. Why were they so curious? They had nearly gotten her to confess that she had been with Matt—who had come home early from Spring Break, blaming and breathing threats against “that bastard” Myers again—on both Wednesday and Sunday nights. So far, she had kept his secret.